

Homelands vs “The Tropics”: Crossing the Line

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In Australian fictions, “the tropics” feature as paradisiacal retreats, mosquito-infested war zones, touristic destinations or sites-of-last-resort on terminal pathways north. But they are also homelands and cross-cultural spaces where the nexus between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as well as the environment, climate and geography, is distinctive. Australian writers, as diverse as David Malouf, Thea Astley, Peter Carey, Janette Turner Hospital, Randolph Stowe, Blanche D’Alpuget, Xavier Herbert, Humphrey McQueen, Christopher Koch, Robert Drewe, Inez Baranay, Gerard Lee, and Simone Lazaroo have all explored tropical rainforest, reef and island locations as “exotic” environments. However, texts like *It’s Raining in Mango* and *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (Thea Astley), *White Lies* (Trevor Shearston), *Prints in the Valley* (David Carter), *Below The Line* (Eric Willmot), and *Plains of Promise* (Alexis Wright), reveal complex understandings of place and people—what Homi K. Bhabha calls “domains of difference” (2). In these fictions, invasive global forces are countered by resistances and adaptations generated by local and regional imperatives. This paper considers “the tropics” as contested sites in Australia and New Guinea, and indicates tensions between writing *about* or from *within* homelands. Such problematisation of border-conditions is a timely reminder of the politics of representation and the limitations of the conquering gaze in the business of cross-cultural exchange.

Contrary to claims that we now live in a borderless global community, it has been observed recently that “one of the consequences of a globalised world is the desire for local communities to define themselves by their own boundaries and not those imposed by others” (Bantick 5). Issues of sovereignty and cultural integrity are implicit in this demarcation between identification and ascription, and local or global control over naming, language and land rights. But it is not only in

contemporary times, characterised by postcolonial migration, increased travel, and rising fears of terrorism or invasion of home spaces, that borders have loomed largely in the Australian national consciousness and emotive language been used to define them. The challenge of what lies beyond home environments (to name, discover, fear, acquire, subdue, control, or keep out) has been an ancient human incentive informing ideologies and actions. In fact, dealing with difference and contested boundary conditions shapes the various fictions (political, media and literary) by which we live. Recent global conflicts, fuelled by territorial, religious or racial paranoia, have further sharpened debate but, as Ien Ang suggests in *On Not Speaking Chinese*, the legacies of on-going Australian “racial/spatial anxieties,” and the difficulties of crossing boundaries to admit the “complicated entanglement of togetherness in difference,” metamorphose over time but essentially prevail (126–37).

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues passionately for the creative use of borderline spaces as transformative sites, where barriers drawn between peoples might be interrogated or diminished. He claims that:

borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress. (2)

This describes a process of intervention, which is a potential that fiction exploits. Discussion of the selected texts begins with designations of the tropics as region and trope, but then focuses on portrayals of homelands which innovatively shift beyond “normative” enclosure.

THE TROPICS

“The tropics,” sometimes called “the torrid zone,” denote regions 23.5 degrees north and south of the equator, but also traditionally connote oppressive, burning, parched or passionate conditions, implicitly at a distance from European cool and calm. Like the European view of the Far East, these are sites to visit, serve in, endure or escape to (or from). Trevor Shearston’s *White Lies* and David Carter’s *Prints in the Valley* face the near north to focus on Australia’s participation in the colonising of New Guinea, while Gerard Lee’s and Inez Baranay’s portrayals of the traumas of tourism move off-shore to interrogate more recent neo-colonialist discourse—and the touristic gaze. Mainland tropics shimmering under the blue blaze have been characteristically viewed from the privileged traveller’s perspective, often that of

southerners escaping north to the 40% of Australia which lies in these sunlit zones. However, Thea Astley's short story entitled "Travelling Even Farther North: David Williamson You Must Have Stopped at the Border" challenges this convention. Her peripatetic outsider's encounter with the tropics is satirically epitomised by a well-known Cairns icon: that looming presence of a giant plastic James Cook which turns its back on local development to face "wistfully south" (440). Forsaking further discovery, this traveller seeks shelter in the familiar only to be overcome by angst (and a "loss of muscle tone") in soulless, disorientating foodaramas (441).

Astley's novel *A Boatload of Home Folk* more seriously characterises the escape-route north as:

A group of ordinary tourists—each weary of everyday life, each seeking a panacea—takes a pleasure cruise to a tropical island paradise. But it's hell they discover—in the stifling heat, in the smouldering volcano, in the hurricane-devastated landscape, and finally within themselves. (Cover-note)

In Astley's writing, such journeys of self-discovery are thematic, but what is found is neither peaceful nor exotic when she investigates the effects of European intrusion on the lives and home territories of Indigenous Australians. Employing stark realism, irony and satire, Astley reveals racially-framed prejudices, tyrannous European appropriation, genocidal atrocities, and on-going social injustice. Here, prior land ownership is an evident but denied political fact as big developers ensure that Australian environments remain subject to rapacious exploitation. *Its Raining in Mango*, *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* and *Drylands* exemplify these aspects of Astley's *oeuvre*.

In a related vein, but on the other side of the continent, Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* sees Lu Fox seek isolation and find salvation in the remoteness of the north-west tropical zone, but not before he is given the key to the territory by Axel (on whom "the world turns"), the indigenous gate-keeper who sets him on the right path by burning his western-made maps. In a parallel journey in the centre of the continent, Eva Sallis' *Hiam* undertakes a pilgrimage, initially to escape, and then to confront her past. Her fears (symbolised by recurrent images of a dead husband, the Blessed Prophet Mohammed, and her desire to encounter a crocodile at East Alligator River) are faced as she negotiates both the unknown desert environment and her own haunted psychological terrains. There is a brief but significant encounter with Indigenous Australians which serves as an indicator of her progress beyond the confines of her conditioned prejudices. Such writing, across cultural and racial lines, may risk appropriation of others' spaces, but it does acknowledge co-presence and the existence of other knowledges. Iain Chambers describes a position and process of cross-border dialogue that arguably justifies such a risk:

I begin to comprehend that here there are limits, there also exist other voices, bodies, worlds on the other side, beyond my particular boundaries. In the pursuit of my desires across such frontiers I am paradoxically forced to face my confines [. . .] to sustain the dialogues across them. Transported some way into this border country, I look into a potentially further space: the possibility of another place, another world, another future. (5)

Trevor Shearston's *White Lies* dramatises this frontier. The novel is set in New Guinea in the early 1970s and deals with indigenous and European-Australian cultural intersections. As in Astley's *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, set in an off-shore Australian island mission, the so-called "civilising" enterprise is revealed as a disguise for the further acquisition of territory and resources. Shearston's terminology is telling: "The government, the first time, came and passed also like a fever," but not before the men with skins like "the colour of ripe bananas" had demonstrated their fire-power and their trading capacity, introducing steel tools which altered the balance of labour in the country for all time (2). The aeroplanes came and the "bottomless lake" was measured. In these ways the land and people were subdued by language and a new religion which prohibited recourse to traditional ways. *White Lies* charts a violent confrontation between traditions in the mission's determination to subvert Indigenous values when, in a travesty of the imposed faith, a local leader is crucified after precedents and traditional rituals are neglected, and the new church is burnt to the ground.

COLONISING ENTERPRISE

Pre-figuring corporate enterprises like those satirised in Peter Carey's *Bliss*, and echoing the very real exploitation of New Guinea's natural resources by Australian companies, the geologists in *White Lies* are in the tropics looking for oil. They examine the ravines and valleys through binoculars, a distance, we are told, that "aroused no awe" (Shearston 1). Conversely, the Gewa speak of their valley's and lake's evolution in mythic terms, commemorating the feats of ancestral hunters. Their reading of their world does not measure material resources or supply evolutionary proofs in European terms: it is community knowledge that is at odds with the scientists' work. For the "Gewa, the telling transcends story: how else could the lake be?" and their map of place is, like *The Dreaming*, a source of cultural renewal which re-activates and affirms (1). Similarly, the lake, which Ruth finds so pacific, commands respect from the community: they remember a time when it suddenly fell to a dangerously low level—an insight, born of long occupation of a known world. Throughout this text, European "empirical" science

and local knowledges compete.

The lives of the local inhabitants are measured by their relation to their natural world with its tropical seasons and demands. Distances between places are gauged by the Gewa in relation to physical effort as "half a day's paddling," and, as the geologists note "thirteen miles," contrasting values are inscribed (1). It was not until the kiaps began their program of so-called pacification and protection in New Guinea, and patrolled remote areas on foot, that the measure of a day's walk made sense to the colonisers. In telling the story of a particular mission's interaction with local inhabitants, Shearston surveys broader cultural relations between Australia and New Guinea. The missionaries' faith in saving the natives from "savagery" (Richard's convinced position) is set against the use of teachers and medics as agents of tacit conquest (38). Paradoxically, their work as educationalists and health workers becomes the new magic for the indigenous population (Ruth is caught between identification with her Gewa patients and the mission's authority). But Shearston ensures that his readers gauge the extent of disparity between conflicting world views.

Throughout, the natural environment is pitted against the imposed order of the invaders, and it is just a matter of time before things fall apart, and the old ways and "the tropics" hold sway. This trope is familiar: in colonial narratives, lost control over environmental factors signifies comparable psychological disorientation—the "gone troppo" threat well demonstrated in Gerard Lee's Australian school-teacher's adventures in *Troppo Man*, or in Thea Astley's *It's Raining in Mango* where Will fights the tyranny of grass by smoking it (and rolling in it) after disavowing mowing (172).

Shearston investigates the power and limitation of language as a site of unification and division between cultures. This is evident in Richard's use of "names" as a weapon of identification after the deaths of Sebo and his son, when the Gewa are acting as one and he insists on identifying them individually—breaching yet again a taboo of their custom (181). Shearston demonstrates the consequence of a failure to realise the extent of one's cultural difference. Even Ruth stands indicted by her own assumption that she "knows" these people. In a profound moment of the novel, as the Gewa move off to seek retribution for the torching of the church, Ruth has a private epiphany:

She caught sight of people moving at the shelters sixty yards away, and halted, suddenly aware of the paleness of her blouse in the moonlight. The feeling was new to her. Not fear (though over there were men who had just slaughtered other men). More wariness—the recognition that learning a language did not mean learning a people. When she began moving again she kept to the shadow beside the wall. (189)

In contact zones between cultures, while naming is a political act defining power relations, there are other (often unspoken) agendas (customs, superstitions, other ways of seeing) that subvert or modify social conditions, and illustrate the “performative nature” of cultural engagement (Bhabha 2). In the homelands of *White Lies*, imported European agendas and words prove false, relations unravel and local lives are damaged, but essential indigenous narratives prevail.

RE-READING TROPICAL ISLES

In Astley’s *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, missionary zeal and its imposition on an island community’s way of life sees a tropical paradise turned into a dumping ground for “more poor fella half-castes rounded up as if the bullmen were droving sheep” (115). Regimenting despair with bells, ration-lines, segregation, curfews, floggings and detention, the novel’s appalling story of deprivation is, like *A Kindness Cup*, “based loosely [but regrettably not loosely enough on] an incident in North Queensland over sixty years ago” (Acknowledgments). After news of the Pilbara strike, an island up-rising against injustice is quelled with colonial efficiency by batons and leg-irons. The islanders suffer physically, emotionally and culturally, and the novel ends with their suppression, forced removal and lament for “lost” community.

Astley’s early short stories were set in territories more akin to Carey’s *Bliss* and Turner Hospital’s *Charades*, where alternative lifestyles in tropical domains were located in pristine or fecund havens remote from antithetical city/materialist/un-natural spaces. But this reading of “the tropics” is increasingly challenged as Astley examines the on-going presence and rights of Indigenous people. In an early interview she spoke of the sensitivities involved in writing about a culture that is not one’s own, but also of her faith in the novel’s capacity to educate or “elicit charity [in the Pauline sense]” which has fuelled her on-going attention (Ellison 61). *A Kindness Cup* demonstrates the difficulty of crossing racial lines to attempt to redress injustice in a town which refuses to acknowledge complicity in a prior massacre and instead perpetuates on-going racial discrimination. Closure is not achieved as the story is again suppressed (a fire destroys the newspaper office) and the whistle-blower/school-teacher is subjected to further violence. These concerns are evident in *It’s Raining in Mango*, and *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* and *Drylands*, where dispossession and dispersal also decimate communities. In *It’s Raining in Mango*, the European Australian Laffey’s family story is foregrounded, while the “Mumbler” family’s story is glimpsed in the interstices between snapshots of the nation’s performance. The story of both reveals the nation’s ruthless or paternalistic silencing of Indigenous voices, but Astley’s perspective remains tuned by her outrage at colonial actions and her position as a spokesperson for her race.

"BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE REAL THERE IS NO LINE"

David Carter's *Prints In The Valley* also sets parallel worlds in juxtaposition to cross the line in ways Bhabha might applaud. He segments the sequence to simultaneously explore social conditions in Australia in 1963 and Papua New Guinea in 1967. In section two, (set in 1968) two lives come together as Alec, the kiap, encounters the sixteen-year-old Indigenous girl Koam, who will eventually warn him of her villagers' intentions to kill him. Like Shearston's novel, this narrative is about the intrusion of Europeans into village life, but the mission is the back-drop here. In this home territory, in-roads to the highland valleys remain difficult (the natural environment protects communities) while settlement of coastal areas saw colonisation more simply achieved.

Carter's novel offers insights into village life before intervention to convey a sense of a complex indigenous lifestyle in which the patrol officer is a late and unwelcome arrival. There are diverse human interactions within the indigenous group where tradition and ritual hold sway. For example, Koam's people have been pre-warned by prior tribal experience of invasion, and their resistance to the kiap's wishes is deemed wholly necessary by them. The ensuing violence is depicted as considered rather than impulsive, and this makes the girl's defection a more complex gesture of rebellion—one related to her outsider status in her own community. The telling of the tale from two diverse perspectives, especially by Koam, offers fictional possibilities not explored in *White Lies*. Local and foreign values and personal dreams and fears are again examined, but, in *Prints in the Valley*, the stories of two outsiders from worlds which seem to have nothing in common are curiously similar.

The novel's sequences are punctuated by a lyrical commentary on events. A mediating voice speaks of a larger order of things creating a third space which transcends but combines the two narratives, synthesising past and future and dream and reality. *Prints in the Valley* compares the belief systems of Alec and Koam as they struggle to define their places within "the dream." These are at odds with their inherited cultural mores, but the Master storyteller insists that "Between the dreaming and the real there is no line" (Epigraph):

I speak from within man's dream of himself;
of the mosaic of paths that are laid for
him and by him; of a man who sees his own death,
and dreams beyond. For I am the
Tambran and I am everything: I am master
of the dream, and trace, with love, your
prints in the valley. (Shearston 10)

The valley is Koam's homeland, but personal dreams become pathways beyond cultural and gendered lines. Koam transcends fear as she warns the kiap because sharing language has enabled her to see something of his humanity and vulnerability, and her recognition of his worth is akin to her shrewd assessments of her own people. Here language is a powerful narrative tool, an instrument of colonisation and something to be transcended as the protagonists defy words that would constrain them. The novel's dual endings maintain ambiguity (the lovers probably both die saving the life of a third party, the district nurse): they remain linked in life (and death) by their mutual desire to do "one good thing." Shearston explores social, racial, sexual, gender, class and philosophical boundaries and adjusts the form of the novel, with its interspersed dream sequences and shifts between past, present and future, to demonstrate the tenuousness of distinctions and the complexity of life's "mosaic of paths."

BELOW THE LINE

Eric Willmot's speculative fiction *Below the Line* differently enlarges the frames of reference in relation to borders, colonising forces and Australian life in the tropics. It is set in the future, but not so far down the track that the footprints of familiar political pathways have been obliterated. *Below the Line* begins in New Guinea with the incarceration (and rape) of an Australian woman being held with three other mixed-race women by Indonesian soldiers in occupied New Guinea. After two years away and her rescue from this camp, the woman is returned by the US navy to what was her homeland, to find that Australia is configured differently: it exists only "below the line," the north being occupied and re-named The Republic of South Irian. This nightmare of the tropics was prefigured by the war-time proposal of:

an imaginary line drawn by a defence strategist in 1942 that extended south-west from a point north of Brisbane, Qld, and demarcated the land which was to be defended in the event of a Japanese invasion of Australia [. . .]. For security reasons the military authorities denied the existence of a Brisbane line. (*The Oxford Companion to Australian History* 89)

In Willmot's fiction, Indonesian/Australian relations have been redefined by mass migration into what was northern Australia, partly as a consequence of US neglect and the UN's inability to reverse this colonising process. Furthermore, the take-over is not by invasion of a military force but has occurred by re-settling, echoing tactics employed in the middle east. This has been facilitated by the

machinations of corporate players with huge financial interests within and beyond Australia.

In the novel, Brisbane is North of the Line, so the returning citizen is stateless—an XNOL who paradoxically finds herself more at home in the sub-tropics of new South Irian than in the paranoid, bureaucracy-ridden, sold-out Australia where civil restrictions are the order of the day. This depiction of a residual Australia below the tropic of Capricorn sees Indigenous habitation further circumscribed to provide a buffer-zone between occupied territories. The country itself has defeated other would-be inhabitants, but the Indigenous “chosen-ones” maintain their watch over what is left of their homelands (133). The novel is a spy-thriller and love-story and, like all of the texts discussed here, far more complex than this brief introduction implies. It re-reads a familiar national trope, extends fictive representations of Indigenous presence, prefigures the current resurgence of fortress Australia, and offers a satiric solution to the country’s ills (pre Mabo) to comment on the on-going struggle for Indigenous independence and land rights.

These analyses of people in contested spaces now speak to an Australian society supposedly better informed about the significance of land and birth-place to first-nations’ people, but twenty years after publication they confirm unresolved cross-cultural conflicts. Representations of Indigenous lifestyles, modes of belonging, seeing, and saying remain hierarchised in dominant discourses. Also, the realities of homelands have rarely been the focus of Australian fictions (except perhaps in the life-story genre). It should be acknowledged that, despite goodwill and a new range of Indigenous voices, depictions of “the other” in European literary forms often remain bound by the expectations of established publication mores—arguably a further occupation of epistemological and territorial space.

Indigenous writers like Sam Watson, Kim Scott or Alexis Wright (and pioneers like Mudrooroo and Roberta Sykes) redress this imbalance by re-thinking the ways in which the accommodating flexibility of the novel might be further proved, and by depicting imaginative worlds that subvert European Australia’s presumed possession. They open up what Bhabha calls a “creative intervention,” “an interrogatory, interstitial space between the act of representation—who? what? where?—and the presence of community itself” (3). For example, Alexis Wright’s novel *Plains of Promise* ranges over physical, emotional and spiritual terrains in ways which re-inhabit European spatial discourses. She writes from *within* homelands about the re-discovery of Indigenous inheritance in a three-generational saga that depicts the chaotic, on-going, repercussions of colonial repression and dispossession. Wright reveals the violations of culture, the disorientation of being an outsider, a non-initiate *within* a community as a now adult “lost” child returns to the northern gulf country and the dreaming place of her mother’s ancestors. Returning with her child, the woman encounters—but cannot fully comprehend—the cycle of violence that has prefigured, but still defines, her life’s relation to

community. Wright offers the reader “insider” knowledge about the legacies of colonisation, with its horrendous displacement, cultural discontinuity and its far-reaching implications for ensuing lives. She also underlines the ways in which dispersal and lost allegiance to customary law continues to inform contemporary black politics—a vital educational aspect of her book.

Like Willmot’s *Pemulwuy*, Wright’s novel articulates ways of reading the world not readily accessed by those outside “homelands,” as region and family make claims well beyond the borders imposed by western social obligations and its familiar ontologies. Wright also employs non-indigenous story-telling conventions: there are conflation of time (as present and past overlap in surreal sequences of generational experience) akin to those evoked in *Prints in the Valley*, but this is nightmare rather than “dream” territory. Here the fiction allows horror to be spoken that, in more personal narratives, is necessarily silenced. Bhabha has spoken of such work in the following terms:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with “new” that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (7)

CONCLUSION

These texts all confront cross-cultural and racial difference and, to the extent that they demonstrate cultural relativity, expose the power and shortcomings of logocentric practises, and represent realities without simply mirroring constructions of the past, they deserve attention. The novels by Willmot and Wright particularly demonstrate the value of listening to previously silenced voices and relinquishing mono-cultural assumptions if a dialogue is to take place. While lines between “the tropics” and “homelands” remain drawn in such hybrid spaces, discourses are contested: they *become* the means whereby “the act of cultural translation” may be performed:

They articulate the death-in-life of the idea of “the imagined community” of the nation; [but] the worn out metaphors of resplendent national life now circulate in another narrative of entry-

permits and passports and work-permits that at once preserve and proliferate, bind and breach the human rights of the nation (Bhabha 164)

The difficulties of "Borderline" transgressions, in life or art, are summarised by Janette Turner Hospital's wry observation that "You have to be fleeing an approved dictatorship before you count as a refugee" (*Borderline* 95). In the territories inhabited by insider and outsider, resident and immigrant, establishment and emergent groups, Ien Ang's reminder remains salutary:

The desire for dialogues with the "other side" in the border country [. . .] may be a luxury pursuit possible only from a position of relative, arguably Eurocentric privilege [. . .] it [still] matters who you are in border encounters. (165)

However, the novels surveyed provide subversive apertures by refusing subordination, demonstrating agency, and perpetuating the dream of honourably shared communal space.

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